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Barbara Johnson's Astonishment

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Always changing, holding tight;
Near and far and far and near;
Now in one shape, now another;
I am here to astonish you.
—Goethe, "Parabase"

It is obvious that there would be no queer theory without poststructuralism, but it is worth pausing to ask: what poststructuralism are we talking about? Attempts to delineate a post-structuralist influence on queer theory are more likely to cite Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault than to cite theorists who fall under the banner of deconstruction, despite what Madhavi Menon describes as "the interrelatedness of, and therefore the lack of absolute difference between, deconstruction and queer theory."[1] And even when critics *do* evoke deconstructive influences, they are more likely to invoke the name of Jacques Derrida than those associated more firmly with the American "Yale School" brand of deconstructive rhetorical reading, chiefly Paul de Man and Barbara Johnson.[2] In his book *Theory after Theory*, Nicholas Birns pinpoints why this pattern of elision should be the case: "Despite its rhetoric of play and game, deconstruction, especially in the version professed by Paul de Man, has often seemed ascetic and monastic. . . . Queer theory discourses shared the freedom and subversiveness of deconstruction, but they enabled that freedom to be less purely cerebral, more embodied."[3]

Using the same rhetoric, D. A. Miller appears to confirm these assumptions in his recent short memorial piece, "Call for Papers: In Memoriam Barbara

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Johnson." In a clever and moving reading of Johnson's reading of Miller's own reading of Barthes, Miller laments the fact that Johnson's work has frequently been "denied all the linguistic, psychic, and erotic intensities of writing," read more for its abstract content than for its embodied style.[4] Working against this tendency, he brings out of the very style of her essay a desire to be brought out as *having* desire (and style). What is noteworthy is the role that deconstruction plays in Miller's discussion. "Idealizing Barbara's mind," he writes, "dismissed the flesh of her prose as thoroughly as if the high regard in which she was . . . 'held' were a sort of cloister, and she a Deconstructionist nun." Johnson's desire, according to Miller, is not "a wish to be deconstructed; it is a wish to be *brought out*, to be disclosed as an embodied (sexed) author rather than an abstracted (neutered) analyst"; and "the discipline of deconstruction," he adds, "hardly helps her utter such a wish; if anything it tends to keep it in abeyance, bonding writerly virtuosity to authorial self-effacement."[5] It would seem, then, that Miller recapitulates a familiar story about deconstruction and, in the process, relies on a set of explicit and implicit binary oppositions—body versus mind, sensuality versus abstraction, materialism versus idealism, the personal versus the impersonal—that both deconstruction and queer theory, to say nothing yet of Johnson's work itself, might otherwise lead us to question.[6]

The following essay is a response to Miller's "Call for Papers." I want to take a cue from his reading of Johnson and pay close attention to "the flesh of her prose," but I wish to question upfront the notion that "the discipline of deconstruction" is merely or purely antithetical to a more embodied reading of Johnson's sense of style. According to Miller, "It was precisely as one who, both on principle and by temperament, refused to bring herself forward, that Barbara wanted to be brought out; but for the same reasons, she could only *say* she wanted this . . . with such obliqueness that it requires inordinately close reading just to track the desire."[7] Where Miller tracks the oblique ways in which Johnson "wanted to be brought out," I explore instead the complex ways in which she "refused to bring herself forward" and demonstrate how that apparent refusal—a key feature of commonplace notions of deconstructive theory—has queer resonances that may prove difficult to swallow. My aim, however, is not to defend, justify, recuperate, or redeem deconstruction from the charges of abstraction, idealism, and disembodiment and thus to claim Johnson more fully and more firmly for the canon of queer theory. As Johnson herself might put it, the differences *between* deconstruction and queer theory work to occlude unacknowledged differences *within* each term, and those differences within deserve to be brought out. I want to argue, then, that it is precisely the *un*suitability of deconstructive thought for more recognizable

and reassuring queer projects that may offer astonishing lessons for queer theory as it now finds itself in its third decade.

Johnson's body of work is a particularly advantageous site for exploring these issues because her writing, as critics like Lee Edelman have shown us, *performs* as much as it asserts the intractability of language when it comes to forms of identity, knowledge, and meaning.[8] Stylistically, that performance presents itself in her work in what appears to be a coy withdrawal or withholding, what Avital Ronell, reading Johnson's essay "Euphemism, Understatement, and the Passive Voice," has called "a hallucinatory spiral of identificatory peekabo."[9] While commentary on Johnson's work, Ronell's included, has focused largely on Johnson's interventions in deconstruction, feminism, translation, and African American studies, the implications of that "hallucinatory spiral" for queer theory deserve to be brought out in a sustained fashion. My analysis revolves around what makes Johnson's "astonishing work"—to quote another phrase of Ronell's—so astonishing: namely, her performance of astonishment itself.[10] As I show, Johnson ties the figure of astonishment to the act of reading "as a lesbian," but such astonishment provides little to no assurance that reading "as a lesbian" can be pinned down in a recognizable or fruitful form.

If, as Johnson has argued, "it is impossible to know whether one is bringing out the person or the writings" ("Bringing Out," 8), then the ambiguous and ambivalent tension between Johnson's writings and Johnson the lesbian/person needs not to be settled but to be held open as a tension. As Denise Riley has written in a different context: "It's not just a matter of the unspoken 'implications' of what's said, but something stronger: of how language as the voice of its occasion can also inflect its speakers. And the difficulty persists of naming this aspect of the life of language, if it's no longer held to be hard bound in the narrows of semantic meaning, nor, as a reaction, abandoned to babbling frilliness."[11] Because Johnson's work performs the persistent difficulty of naming this volatile process of linguistic inflection, personification, and identificatory positing—the process, in short, of naming as such—it seems to offer no guarantee for any queer theory invested in the acts of bringing out or coming out. Indeed, it seems instead to reinforce the epistemology of the closet. As I argue here, however, the uncomfortable lesson that Johnson's writing, Johnson's astonishment, and Johnson's deconstruction can offer queer theory now is the difficult, though important and even pleasurable, necessity of not knowing what one is bringing out—and of not knowing where one is coming out.[12]

Perhaps the best way to begin this analysis is by looking at a direct queer critique of one of Johnson's most famous early exercises in deconstructive reading.

In her landmark essay on Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, published in *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick twice cites Johnson's own landmark essay on *Billy Budd*, "Melville's Fist." Discussing the text's ambiguous framing of its urbane master-at-arms, John Claggart, Sedgwick writes: "Sentence after sentence is produced in which, as Barbara Johnson points out in her elegant essay 'Melville's Fist,' 'what we learn about the master-at-arms is that we cannot learn anything.'"[13] From this point on, Sedgwick's analysis seems to diverge from Johnson's: where Johnson reads the ambiguous Claggart in terms of epistemological and metalinguistic questions, Sedgwick attempts to bring out the meaning of that ambiguity. After asking, "What *was* — Melville asks it — the matter with the master-at-arms?" and then providing two quasi-contradictory answers ("Claggart is depraved because homosexual, or alternatively depraved because homophobic"), Sedgwick goes on to complicate the issue:

> Arguably, however, there can be no full or substantive answer at all to the question; even as it evokes the (stymied) expertise of certain taxonomic professions, the narrative has nonetheless gone to considerable lengths to invite the purgative reading that "Melville's Fist" exemplarily performs, the reading in which Claggart represents a pure *epistemological essence*, a form and a theory of knowing untinctured by the actual stuff that he either knows or comprises. Claggart, in this reading, "is thus a personification of ambiguity and ambivalence, of the distance between signifier and signified, of the separation between being and doing. . . . He is properly an ironic reader, who, assuming the sign to be arbitrary and unmotivated, reverses the value signs of appearances."[14]

Before we agree too quickly with this characterization of "Melville's Fist," there's an important observation to make: Sedgwick's claim that Johnson's essay purges the gay content out of *Billy Budd* is *itself* a purgation of the gay content out of *Johnson's essay*. For Johnson *is* quite explicit about what is, or at the very least could be, the matter with Claggart:

> While the majority of readers see Billy as a personification of goodness and Claggart as a personification of evil, those who do not, tend to read from a psychoanalytical point of view. Much has been made of Claggart's latent homosexuality, which Melville clearly suggests. Claggart, like the hypothetical "X—," "is a nut not to be cracked by the tap of a lady's fan." The "unobserved glance" he sometimes casts upon Billy contains "a touch

> of soft yearning, as if Claggart could even have loved Billy but for the fate and ban." The spilling of the soup and Claggart's reaction to it are often read symbolically as a sexual exchange, the import of which, of course, is lost on Billy, who cannot read. (*Critical*, 89)

In the case of *Billy Budd*, then, those who do not read allegorically tend to read psychoanalytically. Those who read the novella psychoanalytically tend to read homosexually, identifying a gay subtext: Claggart's "latent homosexuality." Such a homosexual reading involves reading "symbolically," interpreting the spilling of soup as a homoerotic sexual exchange. And those who cannot understand the "import" of such symbols, like Billy, "cannot read." Johnson seems to support this reading by writing that "Melville clearly suggests" it. But the phrase "clearly suggests" stands as something of an oxymoron. If homoeroticism is relegated to the realm of "suggestion," of connotation, how can it ever be "clear"? How can we ever be sure that the meanings of such suggestions have been, or will be, sufficiently brought out?

This last question preoccupies Johnson's later essay on Miller. In the middle of her paper, Johnson quotes a notorious sentence from Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author": "Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing."[15] And here is her commentary:

> This at first seems like a homophobic Aufhebung of the question. . . . That is probably why the essay itself was so influential—it opened the closet door a crack, and then allowed what could be seen from there to become generalized in such a way as to slam it shut. The neuter, or neutral, space of writing can be understood that way, and Miller's book is partly a response to that reading. The later Barthes, it is said, acknowledged gay desire more and more. Miller writes to bring out the gayness of even the early Barthes. And he does so irrefutably. But even there, might Barthes not also be talking about the *sexiness* of writing in a different sense? What if "the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing," far from being a denial of the body, is actually the body's own denial of the category of identity? What if sexuality were not a type of identity but a type of loss of identity? After all, it is the traditional criticism Barthes is opposing that speaks of Baudelaire's failure, Van Gogh's madness, Tchaikovsky's vice. The civil status conferred by identity—each must go to his native land and enroll himself—is precisely what Barthes is arguing

> *against*. But when writing makes you *not* know yourself, he implies, something sexy is happening. ("Bringing Out," 7)

At first glance, Barthes could be seen as sublimating, in a "homophobic Aufhebung," the homoerotic implications of his discussion; *but then*, on closer inspection, Barthes's statement can be read as a subtle acknowledgment of the relationship between sexuality and textuality. Johnson's own writing performs that subtlety through its use of the subjunctive mood, the mood of potentiality and desire ("*Might* Barthes not also be talking about . . . ?"; "What if . . . ?"; "What if . . . ?"). What does her text accomplish by signifying sexuality in the subjunctive? Let me return to that question after a short detour.

To the extent that it valorizes ignorance, the last sentence of this passage ("when writing makes you *not* know yourself") is a staple of Johnson's work, present even, or especially, in the preface to her first collection of essays, *The Critical Difference*: "It is what you don't *know* you don't know that spins out and entangles 'that perpetual error we call life'" (*Critical*, xii). But it also, more locally, recalls the first sentence of Miller's book, around which Johnson's close reading revolves. Here is Miller's first sentence: "Twenty years ago in Paris, long before I, how you say, *knew myself*, a fellow student told me he had seen Roland Barthes late one evening at the Saint Germain Drugstore."[16] Johnson playfully riffs on Miller's italicized phrase, reading it as a shibboleth, a code that both conceals and reveals something. And after briefly discussing the leading role that the phrase "know thyself" plays in classical philosophy and tragedy, Johnson poses the following questions:

> So what is the irresistible and irrefutable knowledge being claimed in D. A. Miller's "*knew myself*"? What did he know and when did he know it? Twenty years ago, he didn't. Now he does. This is a conversion narrative, like all classic coming out stories. I once was fake, but now I'm real—was bound, but now I'm free. . . . Yet not exactly. Nothing except the structure of before and after—then vs. now—or rather "long before" and . . . what? The only thing asserted is that knowing oneself has a before. ("Bringing Out," 5)

Notice how the otherwise simple grammar of Johnson's own sentences unravels once the path of her interpretation takes her from Miller's obscure "knew myself" to the subject of "classic coming out stories." Once Johnson fills in the vagueness of Miller's shibboleth with the explicit gay content "being claimed *in*" it ("knew

myself" = came out of the closet), her sentences become, in inverse proportion, *more* vague, broken up by dashes, ellipses, and anacolutha.[17] Moreover, these grammatical discontinuities and interruptions occur when Johnson shifts from the third person ("Twenty years ago he didn't. Now he does") into a bizarrely generalized first person ("I once was fake, but now I'm real"). I say "bizarrely generalized" because the context of the quotation leads us to assume that Johnson's first-person sentence is miming an impersonal "classic coming out story" that all people who have come out might relate, but because Johnson doesn't place these first-person sentences in quotation marks, which would distance her from the generic coming-out narrative she mimes, it seems that this is not merely a generic first-person narrator but also her speaking—or her speaking what appears to be her self.

Johnson's ability to ventriloquize the voices of others in her readings can be disconcerting. A good example can be found in her essay on Henry David Thoreau, published in *A World of Difference*, in which she analyzes the "meaning" of Thoreau's famously obscure symbols in *Walden*: the hound, the bay horse, and the turtle dove.

> If the secret identities of the hound, the horse, and the dove are never to be revealed, it is not, says Thoreau, that they are being *voluntarily* withheld. Such secrets are simply inseparable from the nature of my trade—that is, writing. "I would gladly tell you all that I know about it, and never paint 'No Admittance' on my gate." But all I *know* about it is not all there *is* about it. You are not being forcibly or gently kept away from a knowledge I possess. (*World*, 52–53)

This is translation at its uncanniest, an odd performance of prosopopoeia, as if Johnson were a medium through whom Thoreau's ghost speaks. The fact that Johnson adopts Thoreau's first-person point of view at the precise moment when she is discussing "secret identities," concealment and revelation, and the obscurity of writing slyly suggests that this analysis is as much about the obscurity of her own writing as it is about Thoreau's ("*my* trade"; "a knowledge *I* possess"). In both the Miller essay and the Thoreau essay, Johnson's shifts into a generalized first-person point of view simultaneously conceal and reveal her identity. But the knowledge of identity, Johnson claims, is neither forcibly nor gently kept from us. As Barthes and Thoreau might agree, it simply "slips away" through the writerly activity. What, then, is the knowledge that (Johnson's) writing neither forcibly nor gently keeps away from us, but keeps away from us nonetheless?

This question may very well be the principle explored in and performed by

Johnson's entire body of work, animating not only the content of her work's readings but also, as we are beginning to see, the frequent peculiarities of her style. One of the more astonishing places where such peculiarities come into play is the following quote from her book *Mother Tongues*, where she discusses the "questions" that arise around Sappho:

> As Joan de Jean notes in her *Fictions of Sappho*:
>
> > If I learned anything while working on this study, something for which I was totally unprepared, it is quite simply that Sappho makes a great many people nervous.
>
> (While I was working on the first version of this paper on an airplane, surrounded by two translations and two studies of Sappho, I certainly felt as if I were exposing something that I normally hide!)
>
> > One phenomenon I explain in this way is the recurrent, stubborn refusal to mention female homosexuality under any name. (Commentators thus find themselves in the delicate position of attempting to disprove Sappho's homosexuality without actually naming that which they claim she was not.)
>
> This is the logical extension of the logic of censorship: you treat the thing you are condemning as if it could not be represented without creating the harm you are trying to prevent. The resistance to naming is a good example of the attempt to deny existence to the thing to which one is attempting to deny existence. Which doesn't mean that the thing repressed can't be resistant to naming in another sense. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. (*Mother*, 8–9)

How are we to read the brief parenthetical (and exclamatory) anecdote that interrupts Johnson's quotation of de Jean's study? "I certainly felt as if I were exposing something that I normally hide!" There's something uneasy about this "something"; it reminds me of Miller's "*knew myself*," in that it both conceals and reveals some unspecifiable yet nonetheless connoted content. Because Johnson uses "something" instead of, say, "my lesbian desire" to talk about what she "normally hide[s]," her rhetoric hides what it describes as being hidden.[18]

Does this mean, however, that we can bring a stable meaning out of its hiding place? Notice how the rhetorical certainty with which the statement begins is undercut by the grammar of the sentence, which appears in the subjunctive: "I certainly felt *as if I were* exposing something that I normally hide!" Both the act of hiding and the act of exposing are located grammatically in the realm of potential-

ity or possibility—in which case Johnson, in actuality, neither hides nor exposes her lesbian desire. The only actuality (and certainty) here is that she feels *as if* she were exposing "something" she normally hides.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the next chapter of *Mother Tongues* briefly examines three different texts that use the phrase *as if*: the 1995 film *Clueless*, Hans Vaihinger's book *The Philosophy of "As If,"* and Andrew Boyd's *Life's Little Deconstruction Book*.[19] What unites all three cases, it seems, is precisely the notion of subjunctivity: "as if" creates a counterfactual realm of fantasy and projection. In the case of *Clueless*, for instance, Johnson writes: "The Beverly Hills high school dialect in the film thus makes use of the expression 'as if' in an interpersonal sense. It is always an exclamation, and always casts desire or doubt away from the speaker and onto the addressee" (*Mother*, 35). At first glance, this is a nice summary of Johnson's own use of the phrase in relation to Sappho. At least, Johnson uses an exclamation point.[20]

One more thing to note about Johnson's Sapphic scene of writing: she's seated on an airplane, with texts by and about Sappho surrounding her. Does Johnson feel "as if" she were revealing something she normally hides because the intersubjective situation on the airplane situates her lesbian legibility? If she doesn't actually, intentionally hide her same-sex desire, but if she nevertheless feels as if she were revealing it, and that she thus, by back-formation, *has* something to hide, perhaps it is because of her resistance to being read "as a," a resistance that Jane Gallop has discussed at length in an essay on *The Wake of Deconstruction*.[21] The realm of the "as if," it seems, overlaps with the realm of the "as a."

For guidance on this issue, I turn to *The Wake of Deconstruction*, the book in which Johnson first identifies herself, in writing, "as a" lesbian. In the third and final section of the first essay in *The Wake of Deconstruction*, Johnson reflects on a piece she wrote for the *Harvard Law Review* in 1991, in which she analyzed an unfinished journal article by the feminist legal scholar Mary Joe Frug, who had been brutally murdered on the streets of Cambridge in the middle of working on her manuscript. In the middle of Frug's manuscript there's an incomplete sentence, along with Frug's note for how to complete the thought:

> Women who might expect that sexual relationships with other women could [to be completed by:
>
> economic and security incentives that make a male partner more advantageous for non-sexual reasons than a same-sex partner for women (quoted in *Wake*, 39–40)

Johnson tells us that in her *Harvard Law Review* analysis she wrote about this sentence, calling it "the lesbian gap" and connecting it to two other points in Frug's article where Frug raises "the question of women's relations to each other, and the text leaps in each case to the more familiar topic of women facing men" (*Wake*, 40). With the belated distance of hindsight, Johnson goes on to comment on her *Harvard Law Review* analysis after she recapitulates it:

> The "lesbian gap" is not an isolated and entirely contingent accident: it is part of a logic of repetition in the essay. And my reading assumes that a gap can be read, not by filling it with meaning but by finding the logic of the text to which it contributes, by assuming that the text has its own dynamic—even a text broken by the seemingly contingent accident of death. This is one way to answer the question "How does the gap signify?" (*Wake*, 40)

Even though it is not identified as such, this "one way" of reading is a classic deconstructive move. Johnson focuses on a "gap" in Frug's argument, pulling on the loose thread in order to unravel the logic of the piece as a whole. Rather than read this lesbian gap as a marginally incomplete moment, Johnson demonstrates how the gap actually "contributes" to the essay's "logic of repetition."[22]

But Johnson continues by outlining "other ways" to read the gap. "There are other ways," the next paragraph begins:

> Certainly, as a lesbian, I read the unfinished sentence with astonishment. What was Mary Joe imagining/repressing/fearing/desiring? Did she decide to go to the store because she had too many ideas or too few? Was she afraid she wouldn't get it right? The fact that we will never know the answer to these questions does not prevent me from asking them, but it does require me to read otherwise. (*Wake*, 40)

In her essay on *The Wake of Deconstruction*, Gallop acknowledges that here we see Johnson reading "as a lesbian" and that reading "as a lesbian" takes the form, for Johnson, of being astonished and then asking a series of unanswerable questions. Gallop writes, however: "As interested as I am in this moment where Johnson reads as a lesbian—and in the way that this reading connects to two of her strongest critical preferences (surprise and questions)—I want now to focus instead on the fact that reading as a lesbian is presented as the second of (at least) two ways of reading the same text, of reading the same unfinished sentence" (160). Gallop is therefore less interested in *how* Johnson reads "as a lesbian" than in the fact

that reading "as a lesbian" is only one way that Johnson reads. In the first case, Johnson reads as a deconstructor; in the second, she reads as a lesbian. "Reading as a lesbian," Gallop explains, "is not the first way; it is brought in as an example of 'other ways.' . . . When she does read 'as a lesbian,' it is only one of the ways she reads—and not even the first way" (160–61).[23]

Gallop's analysis of this moment appears in the context of an essay about Johnson's simultaneous acceptance and rejection of identity politics—of what Nancy Miller calls, in a phrase Johnson uses with some variations throughout her work, the politics of "speaking as a ('as a'—fill in the blank)."[24] Thus, when Johnson uses the phrase "as a lesbian," Gallop is interested in the idea of reading "*as a* lesbian." But what does it mean to read "as a *lesbian*"? "Certainly, as a lesbian, I read the unfinished sentence with astonishment. What was Mary Joe imagining/repressing/fearing/desiring?" Several details in these two sentences demand closer attention. Why, for example, does the first sentence begin with "certainly"? How could we read this in relation to the indicative confidence we saw, at first, in Johnson's discussion of Sappho ("I *certainly* felt as if I were exposing something that I normally hide!")? What do we make of the fact that the word *read* in the first sentence can be either a past-tense or a present-tense verb? What's the difference? Why does Johnson, in the second sentence, use a series of words that evoke the vocabulary of psychoanalysis ("imagining/repressing/fearing/desiring")? The sudden explosion of affect these words spark—an affect that Gallop herself briefly notes—sits uneasily with the mechanistic rhetoric of "logic," "repetition," and signifying structures that marks Johnson's deconstructive reading. Is the shift from deconstructive reading to lesbian reading a shift from deconstruction to psychoanalysis (and, by extension, to feeling)?

While all these questions are no doubt important and may lead us to some astonishing places, I would in fact like to focus instead on Johnson's use of the word *astonishment*: "Certainly, as a lesbian, I read the unfinished sentence with astonishment." Gallop connects this word to Johnson's stated preference for "surprise" in reading: "'Astonishment' is a stronger version of 'surprise,' which in the interview [printed at the end of *The Wake of Deconstruction*] she tells us is her reading preference, a preference for an encounter with the unexpected" (159). In an endnote to this statement, Gallop also links Johnson's "astonishment" to the training Johnson received from de Man, which focuses on the "bafflement" produced by language: "If deconstructive reading starts out from 'bafflement,' then it might have something in common with Johnson's 'reading as a lesbian,' which starts out from her 'astonishment.' When she reads 'as a lesbian,' she seems to be reading as a good student of de Man's" (165n16). While "astonishment," "surprise," and "bafflement"

all point to similar signifieds, though, might there not be something specific about the *signifier* "astonishment" that makes it impose itself here?

Astonishment derives from the archaic word *astonied*. The folk etymology of *astonied* among poets, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, was that it is a derivative of *stony*, but in fact it is not: the verb *astony* is from the Old French *estoner* ("to stun or stupefy"), which in turn comes from the Latin *attonare* ("to strike with a thunderbolt"). To be astonished, then, is to be stunned, not stoned.[25] Either way, the word *astonishment* deserves to be brought out in Johnson's oeuvre, for it appears in many of the texts she reads as well as many of the texts she writes. Of the several examples I might discuss, one in particular stands out. In *Sula*, Toni Morrison describes the shell-shocked Shadrack as "permanently astonished," a phrase that Johnson describes in turn as a "wonderful oxymoron" (*Feminist*, 81). If I were more historically, ethically, and even psychoanalytically inclined, I would probably want to open up here a whole set of issues centering on racism, World War I, trauma theory, and Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.[26] Instead, I would like to link this "wonderful oxymoron"—precisely because Johnson does not—to Friedrich Schlegel's "permanent parabasis," that "violently paradoxical" notion that de Man reads in his lecture "The Concept of Irony."[27]

Parabasis designates the moment in Greek Old Comedy when the chorus punctures the dramatic illusion and interrupts the narrative line by addressing the audience directly; it is also more broadly a term for digression. Following Schlegel, de Man adopts the phrase as the very figure of irony. "Irony," de Man claims, "is not just an interruption; it is (and this is the definition which [Schlegel] gave of irony), he says, the 'permanent parabasis,' parabasis not just at one point but at all points, which is how he defines poetry: irony is everywhere, at all points the narrative can be interrupted."[28] In a microscopically close and patient reading of de Man's lecture, Ronell explains that parabasis "involved for Schlegel a kind of surprise attack, an abrupt turn or polemic (attack) that was meant to astonish."[29] After citing the Goethe poem I use as my epigraph, she continues: "On the semantic scene, interruption is seen as unintelligibility that, in Goethe's scene, effects utter astonishment."[30] Redirecting Ronell's reading of de Man's reading of Schlegel, I would add that astonishment's inscription in the chain of deconstructive terms here—parabasis, irony, interruption—helps us see the queerness of such astonishment.[31] Rather than reassure the stability of straight semantic or narrative lines—straight lines that may very well have gay as well as straight motivations—astonishment marks the interruption or suspension of what we think we know, the kind of permanent twisting that the very word "queer," as Sedgwick has pointed out, etymologically evokes.[32]

Constitutively intertwined with parabasis, the queerness of Johnson's astonishment can also be connected with that other p-word so central to the Yale School's rhetorical investigations: prosopopoeia. In his essay "Autobiography as De-Facement," de Man offers a critique of the redemptive, restorative, and revivifying functions that common sense accords to autobiography and thus, by extension, to writing more generally. He argues that prosopopoeia, the fiction of the voice from beyond the grave, the very trope meant to effect such restoration, is simultaneously the cause of its own undoing: "As soon as we understand the rhetorical function of prosopopoeia as positing voice or face by means of language, we also understand that what we are deprived of is not life but the shape and the sense of a world accessible only in the privative way of understanding."[33] De Man's support for this argument centers on a reading of William Wordsworth's citation, in *Essays on Epitaphs*, of John Milton's sonnet "On Shakespeare," in which Milton writes (in lines that Wordsworth notably elides): "Then thou our fancy of itself bereaving / Dost make us marble with too much conceiving." The phrase "dost make us marble," de Man writes, "cannot fail to evoke the latent threat that inhabits prosopopoeia, namely that by making the dead speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death."[34] For both de Man and Johnson, reading thus seems to be a complex process of personification and prosopopoeia—indeed, Johnson has claimed that prosopopoeia is "*the* figure for reading" (*Persons*, 14). Language, that is to say, speaks—and, in the process, it interpellates, positing not only persons and things but also identities and ideological structures.[35] This process figures us. But it can also *dis*figure us—astonish us, make us marble, get us stoned, and strike us dumb.

As someone who works on both Shakespeare and Milton, I was astonished when, upon rereading the Milton sonnet after beginning work on this essay, I rediscovered that the word *astonishment* actually makes an appearance there. Apostrophizing Shakespeare, Milton writes: "Thou in our wonder and astonishment / Hast built thyself a livelong Monument." Shakespeare's work lasts as "Monument," Milton goes on to assert, because of its "Delphic lines," which leave a "deep impression." In other words, Shakespeare's work causes astonishing perplexity through its ambiguous complexity; the Delphic oracle was known for the cryptic form of its pronouncements. As Johnson puts it in her essay on Miller: "The Delphic oracle . . . doesn't ask, doesn't tell, and doesn't pursue" ("Bringing Out," 5). As this comment's allusion to "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" suggests, Johnson, unlike Sedgwick or Miller, may not always be *explicitly* concerned with the epistemology of queerness. But that's only because her work is consistently preoccupied

with what we might call the queerness of epistemology—the way in which any injunction to "know (thyself)" is anamorphically shadowed by what Edelman calls "the all-determining gap that frustrates every attempt to make acts of reading and knowing coincide."[36] Where most metaphysical, philosophical, hermeneutical, spiritual, ethical, political, historical, psychoanalytical, cultural, and sexual ways of knowing operate under the illusion that this gap can be healed, sealed, or simply ignored, Johnson's queer astonishment, like the parabasis of deconstructive thought in general, exposes it, exposing itself, in the process, to the potential charges of abstraction, idealism, and opaque evasion.

It is perhaps because of that gap that the only essay in which Johnson attempts to make queer reading an explicit project does so only to end up telling a story of frustration and failure. The essay to which I'm referring is "Lesbian Spectacles: Reading *Sula*, *Passing*, *Thelma and Louise*, and *The Accused*," published in her book *The Feminist Difference*. Johnson opens the essay by telling us that it began as an attempt to do something she had never done before: "to read explicitly as a lesbian." Her "intention," she writes, "was to push" herself to read as a lesbian. But Johnson goes on to explain that things are not quite so simple, and she does so by invoking a phrase familiar from *The Wake of Deconstruction*:

> Much has been said about the theoretical and political issues involved in what Nancy Miller calls "reading *as a*." On the one hand, to the extent that dominant discourses have used the fiction of universality to ground their authority and to silence other voices, it is important for the voices thus silenced to speak for and as themselves. But, on the other hand, just because something has been silenced doesn't mean it possesses "an" identity, knowable and stable. Speaking "as a" plunges the speaker into new questions of reliable representativity and identity, as Nancy Miller suggests. If I tried to "speak as a lesbian," wouldn't I be processing my understanding of myself through media-induced images of what a lesbian is or through my own idealizations of what a lesbian *should* be? Wouldn't I be treating as *known* the very predicate I was trying to discover? I needed a way of catching myself in the act of reading as a lesbian without having intended to. (*Feminist*, 157)

"To accomplish this," she goes on, "I decided to look at novels or films that did *not* present themselves explicitly as 'lesbian,' but that could, through interpretation, be said to have a crypto-lesbian plot" (*Feminist*, 158). By the end of the first paragraph and the beginning of the second, Johnson characteristically complicates

her initial project, a complication signaled by the repetition of two key words: *explicitly* and *intention*. She began with the "intention" of reading "explicitly" as a lesbian, but the queerness of queer interpretation demands that she needs to first, catch herself reading as a lesbian *without* having "intended" to, and second, interpret texts that *do not* present themselves "explicitly" as lesbian texts. Johnson, it is important to note, seems to have recourse here to a strictly hermeneutic model of queer reading: she decides to look at texts that "could, through interpretation, be said to have a crypto-lesbian plot." But notice how interpretation does not lead to an *identifiable* lesbian plot; "through interpretation" the only thing we arrive at is a *crypto*-lesbian plot. At the exact point where Johnson comes closest to articulating and practicing a hermeneutics of *de*cryption, comes closest, that is, to subscribing to the assumption that one could successfully *bring out* the knowledge of the identity of a subject, the very style of her sentence (notice also the conditional and the passive voice: "could . . . be said") throws that assumption into question.

"Lesbian Spectacles" is repeatedly marked by such stylistic infelicities, agrammaticalities, and typographical errors that simultaneously enact and qualify the aims of the essay—and the aims of Johnson's work more generally. Take, for example, the essay's first sentence: "When I proposed this topic for a paper on 'media spectacles,' my intention was to push myself to try something I *have* never done before: to read explicitly as a lesbian" (*Feminist*, 157; my italics). Johnson's use here of the word *have*—rather than *had*—is easy to pass over, but it is nevertheless important because it suggests that Johnson *still has not* read explicitly as a lesbian, even after preparing for and drafting this particular paper. In fact, the essay's conclusion reveals that the entire experiment was, in some sense, a failure. After establishing (confessing?) that she finds *The Accused*, which ends up validating patriarchal power structures, more erotically satisfying than *Thelma and Louise*, Johnson "conclude[s] that the project of making my own erotic unconscious participate in my reading process, far from guaranteeing some sort of radical or liberating breakthrough, brings me face to face with the political incorrectness of my own fantasy life" (*Feminist*, 163). "Any attempt to go on from this reading to theorize (my) lesbian desire," she goes on to write, "would therefore have to confront the possibility of a real disjunction between my political ideals and my libidinal investments" (*Feminist*, 164). Given Johnson's insistence on her personal erotic life throughout the essay, it is intriguing to note the parenthetical "my" in this sentence—especially because the two subsequent uses of the pronoun in the same sentence are not parenthetical. Without the supplemental "my," the sentence would read as suggesting, rather astonishingly, that any attempt to theorize lesbian desire *as such and in general* has to confront the disjunction between *Johnson's*

particular political ideals and libidinal investments. This "my" functions as both parabasis and prosopopoeia at once: an interruption, however brief, of the essay's narrative line as well as the eruption of a face, a mask, a voice, a personification that tempts us to read it as the stable sign of Johnson's personal identity.

Whether or not this linguistic blip was intended, it forces us to pay attention to a string of comments throughout her discussion of the two films: "I do think that to focus on what the films are saying about men is to focus on men, and thus *(for me)* to view the films heterosexually" (*Feminist*, 160; my italics); "I remembered my very strong sense that I experienced *The Accused* as a lesbian plot while *Thelma and Louise* promised one but, *for me*, failed to deliver" (*Feminist*, 161; my italics); "what does it mean to say that *for me The Accused* 'works' better as a lesbian film than *Thelma and Louise*" (*Feminist*, 162–63; my italics)? In the first quotation, the phrase "for me" is inscribed as a pure parenthetical supplement, like the parenthetical "my" toward the end of the essay, but over the course of the discussion it gets progressively integrated into the stream of Johnson's grammar: first between commas, and thus quasi-supplemental, and then finally with no punctuation whatsoever. What performative work does this little phrase do? Is Johnson's own linguistic style working against or in concert with her hesitation to speak "as a" lesbian? Johnson opens her essay by claiming that her aim was "to take account of my particular desire structure in reading rather than try to make generalizations about desire as such, even lesbian desire 'as such'" (*Feminist*, 157). But the play of personal pronouns at the end of the essay confuses the distinction between the particular and the general that she attempts to draw from the outset. It is as if Johnson's personal erotic unconscious, refusing to be rendered supplemental, were enacting, against her best intentions, the desire to speak *as a* lesbian, to have her personal desires personify "lesbian desire 'as such.'"

In this way, "Lesbian Spectacles" can be read as a supplement to *The Wake of Deconstruction* (both texts were written in the early 1990s), insofar as the tensions between particularity and generality that it raises in particular, at the level of content and the level of style, are raised in more general terms in *The Wake of Deconstruction*. The relationship between personification and identity politics — or, better yet, Johnson's reading of identity politics *as* personification — is brought out, in *The Wake of Deconstruction*, in relation to a split between symbolism and allegory. Explicating de Man's critique of Romanticism's preference for the immediacy of symbol over the mediation of allegory, Johnson writes:

> "Symbol" is thus a "temptation," the temptation of immediate readability, which turns out to be a denial of the structure of representation and of

> the difference between self and non-self. "Allegory" is the recognition of the difference between signifier and signified, of the relation between any use of language and its linguistic or cultural past, and of the difference between self and other. (*Wake*, 63)

What is Johnson's work (not to mention de Man's) if not a struggle against the "temptation of immediate readability," of reading symbolically? Johnson's unclear, ambivalent, cryptic, subjunctive, and seemingly disembodied queer readings and writings may frustrate those who want same-sex desire to be immediately readable. And after centuries of same-sex desire's unreadability, such frustration is at least somewhat understandable. But we might recall some statements that Johnson makes toward the end of her essay "Is Writerliness Conservative?":

> Nothing could be more comforting to the established order than the requirement that everything be assigned a clear meaning or stand. It is precisely because the established order leaves no room for unneutralized (i.e., unestheticized) ambiguity that it seems urgent to meet decisiveness with decisiveness. But for that same reason it also seems urgent not to. . . . If writerliness is defined as attention to the trace of otherness in language, as attention to the ways in which there is always more than one message, then it is hard to see how a true instatement of the power of other voices is possible without something like a writerly apprenticeship. (*World*, 30–31)

Queer theory, like the humanities more generally, can always benefit from a writerly apprenticeship, training in the rigorous unreliability of language. Such an apprenticeship teaches us that the hermeneutic yearning for immediate readability — a yearning notably shared by both homophobic and antihomophobic camps — does not line up so neatly or straightly with the mediated unreadability by which language weaves its tangled web.

It is crucial, however, at least to entertain, if not wholly embrace, the notion that unreadability is a form of permanent and pervasive astonishment, not a temporary moment or superficial space of encryption after or inside which one may find any kind of stable and recognizable truth. Unreadability is inextricably tied up with the "truth," in ways that exceed or confound the inside/outside or surface/depth or before/after binary logics that govern how we think about aesthetics, erotics, and hermeneutics. As Lacan writes: "Of course we must tune our ears [*tendre l'oreille*] to the un-said that lodges in the holes of discourse, but this is not to be understood [*entendre*] as knocking from behind a wall."[37] Queer theory could

do worse than tune its ears to Johnson's injunction to *un*know what we think we know as ourselves: our sexual selves, our social selves, and all the other selves that constitute what we mean when we speak of "personhood" or "identity." This queer maneuver requires us to assume a subjunctive perspective that stands at an oblique angle to indicative styles of knowing—epistemologies invested, that is, in the transparent indication of identity. To occupy this perversely distorted perspective, we must set ourselves up to be astonished—both stoned and stunned—by language's gaps, snags, and torsions. Such torsions, of course, might force us into a contortionist position with which critics in the humanities may no longer be as comfortable as they once were. If that is truly the case, though, then we stand face-to-face with a field that could stand to work on its flexibility—and thereby astonish itself.

Notes

1. Madhavi Menon, "Introduction: Queer Shakes," in *Shakesqueer: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. Madhavi Menon (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 9.
2. One noteworthy exception would be the work of Lee Edelman, which is deeply informed by the work of de Man and Johnson. The fact that this influence counts as an exception can perhaps be glimpsed by some telling adverbs in Carla Freccero's review of Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). Edelman's book, Freccero writes, relies "importantly on Jacques Lacan and *surprisingly and refreshingly* on Paul de Man" (my italics). See Carla Freccero, "Fuck the Future," *GLQ* 12, no. 2 (2006): 332.
3. Nicholas Birns, *Theory after Theory: An Intellectual History of Literary Theory from 1950 to the Early Twenty-First Century* (Ontario, Canada: Broadview, 2010), 267.
4. D. A. Miller, "Call for Papers: In Memoriam Barbara Johnson," *GLQ* 17, nos. 2–3 (2011): 368. See also Miller, *Bringing Out Roland Barthes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and Barbara Johnson, "Bringing Out D. A. Miller," *Narrative* 10, no. 1 (2002): 3–8 (hereafter cited as "Bringing Out"). All subsequent quotations from Johnson's work will also be cited in the text, according to the following abbreviations: *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) (*Critical*); *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) (*World*); *The Wake of Deconstruction* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994) (*Wake*); *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) (*Feminist*); *Mother Tongues: Sexuality, Trials, Motherhood, Translation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) (*Mother*); *Persons and Things* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) (*Persons*).

5. Miller, "Call for Papers," 368–69.
6. This is a story Miller has told before. In a footnote to the *Bleak House* chapter of *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), he asserts that the "trouble with the deconstructionist allegory of signification is not that it is untrue, but that, despite the deceptive 'closeness' of the readings, it is abstract" (99n).
7. Miller, "Call for Papers," 369.
8. See especially Lee Edelman, "Unknowing Barbara," *Diacritics* 34, no. 1 (2004): 89–93; and Edelman, "The Student of Metaphor," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 17, no. 3 (2006): 195–204.
9. Avital Ronell, "Surrender and the Ethically Binding Signature: On Johnson's Reparative Process," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 17, no. 3 (2006): 142.
10. Ronell, "Surrender," 136.
11. Denise Riley, *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 2.
12. Here I am alluding partly to the following sentence in Reuben A. Brower, "Reading in Slow Motion," in *In Defense of Reading: A Reader's Approach to Literary Criticism*, ed. Reuben A. Brower and Richard Poirier (New York: Dutton, 1962), 8: "Not knowing where one is coming out is an essential part of the experience of thinking."
13. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990; rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 94. The adjective Sedgwick uses here to characterize Johnson's essay ("elegant") is the exact same adjective that Miller employs to characterize Johnson ("Call for Papers," 366).
14. Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 96.
15. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142.
16. Miller, *Bringing Out*, 3.
17. That these gaps occur in an essay written in part about Barthes is no accident: earlier in the essay, Johnson reminds us that Barthes wrote about "the sexiness of gaps in garments" ("Bringing Out," 4).
18. Cf. the opening of Edelman's "Unknowing Barbara": "There's something you should know about Barbara Johnson. Something you *don't* know. Something you *can't* know. Something that's hidden in plain sight. And Johnson, though never possessing that knowledge, indicates, time and time again, both its utter impossibility and the impossibility of ceasing to utter it" (89).
19. For a brief discussion of Johnson's work in relation to Vaihinger, see Barry Stampfl, "Hans Vaihinger's Ghostly Presence in Contemporary Literary Studies," *Criticism* 40, no. 3 (1998): 437–54, esp. 446–47.
20. But it might be even more significant—more significant, at least, than this small detail suggests—that Johnson selects *Clueless* as an example. In fact, it would be helpful to digress here to explore that significance. One of the film's subplots turns

on the inability of its protagonist, Cher Horowitz (Alicia Silverstone), to interpret the clues that signify that her new boyfriend, Christian Stovitz (Justin Walker), is gay. These clues include, among others, the fact that Christian "dresses better than" Cher does, that he ignores other women at a club (Cher reads this as an indication of his monogamous attachment to her, but at that moment he is ignoring other women in order to flirt with the male bartender), and that he brings over to her house a videocassette of *Spartacus*—a film from which a suggestive bath scene, in which Lawrence Olivier's character salaciously tells Tony Curtis's, "My taste includes both snails and oysters," was originally cut. Cher prefaces this awkward date by telling us in voiceover, totally unaware of the subtext, that Christian "had a thing for Tony Curtis." If Cher wasn't so clueless, the homoerotic exhibition of *Spartacus* would effectively work, and work effectively, as a kind of Exhibit A (or Exhibit Q) that facilitates the interpretive ingenuity by which she should be able to sum up all the evidence, detect and bring out the queer in Christian, thereby close the case, and, in the process, save face. (We might refer to this entire process as the camp game—and we should bear in mind that it is a *Christian* camp—of Capture the Fag.) In an astonishing plot twist, though, it is actually one of the film's straight teenage boys, Murray (Donald Faison)—the boyfriend of Cher's best friend, Dionne (Stacey Dash)—who unequivocally supplies the information Cher is unable to detect. Cher's initial exasperated response to Murray's revelation of Christian as gay is to say, "Uh uh. No way . . . Not even." Then, after the realization sets in, she laments: "Oh my God, I'm totally buggin'—I feel like such a bonehead."

The entire recognition scene takes place in a car that Dionne, practicing her paltry driving skills, feebly operates. The film establishes a rhetorical connection between Cher's "No way"—her inability or refusal to discover the truth about Christian—and Dionne's automotive wrong ways through the (coincidentally de Manian) figure of blindness: just before Cher comes face-to-face with her own blind spot (i.e., Christian's sexuality), Dionne swerves into the wrong lane after reiterating, like an automaton, the DMV instructions: "Then I glance at my blind spot." And Murray, spinning this trope into the orbit of what he called, earlier in the film, "misogynistic undertones," prefaces his outing of Christian by saying, "Yo, look, are you bitches blind or somethin'?" The entire discussion is abruptly interrupted when Dionne takes a wrong turn onto the frenetic Los Angeles freeway, much to the horror of all three pampered Beverly Hills passengers. Thinking of Edelman's work in *No Future*, one could argue that this entirely comic scene evokes at the same time it contains, through its comedy, the potential for a tragic death drive—literally. After Murray guides Dionne off the freeway, back to the right side of the road, the heterosexual couple begins passionately kissing as Cher, in a medium close-up shot, wistfully watches them and sentimentally says, in voiceover, "Boy, getting off the freeway makes you realize how important love is. After that, Dionne's virginity went from technical to non-existent.

And I realized how much I wanted a boyfriend of my own." The film then cuts to a shot of Christian and Cher riding on a mall escalator, as Cher's voiceover seamlessly continues: "Not that Christian wasn't a blast to hang out with. He was becoming one of my favorite shopping partners."

We can therefore summarize the narrative syntax of the scene as follows: the revelation of Christian as gay creates a kind of disruption, which, whether through direct cause (it is unclear whether the revelation distracts Dionne) or through the mere contingency of cinematic sequence, immediately misleads three of the film's straight characters into a potential death drive; according to the film's narrative logic, this death drive can be avoided only by emphatically reasserting the eros of the heterosexual couple and by reducing Christian to the safely stereotypical status of Cher's shopping, as opposed to sexual, partner. Dionne's car thus works as the literalized metaphorical "vehicle" that, by correcting the wrong turn, or trope, it had initiated, conveys the disruptive energy caused by Christian's queerness back into the realm of heteronormative stability or stereotype.

More specifically, stereotyping plays a significant role in the terms that Murray uses to drive Christian out of the closet. Just prior to announcing rather bluntly, "He's gay," Murray deploys a barrage of stereotypical signifiers: "He's a disco-dancin', Oscar Wilde-readin', Streisand ticket-holdin' Friend of Dorothy—know what I'm sayin'?" Murray's rhetorical question ("know what I'm sayin'?") points to the fact that he's speaking in code—a code that Cher and Dionne should recognize. Murray thus uses these stereotypes as if they were metaphors that indicate a transparent gay identity. But of course there is no inherent or natural relationship of equivalence between being gay and being a fan of disco, Oscar Wilde, Barbra Streisand, or *The Wizard of Oz* and Judy Garland. Within the film's rhetorical universe, Murray uses this constellation of figures metaphorically, or even symbolically, but such metaphors are derived from metonymies only contingently related to gay men.

The film thus provides an answer to the question of Christian's sexual identity. But such an answer can never completely account for, because it papers over, the metonymic slipperiness that structures the question and produces the desire for an answer in the first place. At the end of her brief discussion of *Clueless* in *Mother Tongues*, Johnson writes: "I don't have time to do a reading of the film as a rhetorical treatise, but as a study of substitution, transformation (the makeover), and the narcissism of small differences, it would lend itself well to such treatment" (*Mother*, 35). What is elided in this simultaneous rejection and positing of a reading of *Clueless* "as a" rhetorical treatise (and shortly I will show just how important the phrase "as a" is to Johnson's work) is precisely the way in which the film performs the tension between, on the one hand, the instability of language and eroticism and, on the other, the desire for the stability of textual and sexual meaning.

To conclude this brief digression, let us remind ourselves that the film is an adap-

tation of Jane Austen's *Emma* (in which Christian's closest corresponding character would be Frank Churchill) and consider, then, the following comment that Miller makes in his book on Austen's style, in the midst of his discussion of another queer character: Robert Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility*. "If we imagined the first phase in some unwritten Hegelian history of sexuality," Miller writes, "where heterosexual being has called forth its own not-being, but the latter has not yet synthesized any positive content of its own, Robert would represent that phase, a shadow of sexual dissidence that has no substance but a refusal, the norm denied" (Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003], 16). *Clueless*, by contrast, allegorizes the synthetic moment of this sexual dialectic, in which Christian, unlike Ferrars, *has* developed some positive content, but that content is quickly swept up under the heterosexual rug. (With Miller's invocation of G. W. F. Hegel in mind, we should also not hesitate to point out that one of Cher's teachers in *Clueless* is named Ms. Geist; in fact, the film ends with the marriage of Ms. Geist to another teacher, Mr. Hall, a match that Cher, after the fashion of her Regency-era precursor, had made in the film's first reel.)

21. Jane Gallop, "Reading Johnson as a 'as a': Yes and No," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 17, no. 3 (2006): 151–66; hereafter cited in the text.
22. Cf. Johnson's own description of deconstruction: "Deconstruction thus confers a new kind of readability on those elements in a text that readers have traditionally been trained to disregard, overcome, explain away, or edit out—contradictions, obscurities, ambiguities, incoherences [*sic*], discontinuities, ellipses, interruptions, repetitions, and plays of the signifier" (*World*, 18).
23. In an endnote to her essay, Gallop makes the following astute observation: "The first way is in fact the only way that appears in [Johnson's] essay published in the *Harvard Law Review*. In that piece, she does not read 'as a lesbian.' The only trace of those 'other ways' is a summary dismissal of precisely the unanswerable questions that constitute her lesbian reading: 'It is not my intention to wonder about Mary Joe Frug's motivation, but to see this gap as one that is repeated in other forms in her argument'" (165n17). The actual *Harvard Law Review* essay was reprinted in Johnson's *Feminist Difference*, 183–94.
24. Nancy K. Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminists Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 78.
25. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the semantic slippage between being turned to stone and being stunned or stupefied shows up, of all places, in Johnson's translation of Derrida's *Dissemination*. In her introduction, she comments on how she translated the phrase *médusée par ses propres signes*: this phrase, as she recapitulates her logic, "literally means 'mesmerized by its own signs,' but the word *médusée*, referring as it does to the Medusa, also implies 'being turned to stone.' Hence, the (doubtless related) contemporary sense of 'getting stoned' has been called upon in rendering

médusée par ses propres signes as 'letting itself get stoned by its own signs.'" Given that this phrase comes in the context of Derrida's essay "Plato's Pharmacy," which turns on the undecidable question of whether drugs are poisons or remedies, Johnson's translation is multiply significant. See Barbara Johnson, introduction to Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), xviii.

26. Freud, for example, just after invoking, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the "terrible war which has just ended," claims that the counterintuitive repetition of trauma in dreams "astonishes people far too little." See Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1969), 11. For a spectacular queer and psychoanalytic reading of Shadrack in the context of racial ideology, see Kathryn Bond Stockton, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where "Black" Meets "Queer"* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 88–89.
27. Paul de Man, "The Concept of Irony," in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminsky (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 179.
28. De Man, "Concept of Irony," 178–79.
29. Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 138.
30. Ronell, *Stupidity*, 139.
31. Edelman, for one, calls irony "that queerest of rhetorical devices, especially as discussed by Paul de Man" (*No Future*, 23).
32. Consider Sedgwick's "claim that something about *queer* is inextinguishable. Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive — recurrent, eddying, *troublant*. The word 'queer' itself means *across* — it comes from the Indo-European root *-twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*." See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), xii.
33. Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 80–81.
34. De Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," 78.
35. My mixture of Althusserian with de Manian vocabulary is deliberate and is inspired, in large part, by Michael Sprinker's essay "Art and Ideology: Althusser and de Man," in *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory*, ed. Tom Cohen et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 32–48. See also Ellen Rooney, "Better Read Than Dead: Althusser and the Fetish of Ideology," *Yale French Studies* 88 (1995): 187n9.
36. Edelman, "Unknowing Barbara," 90.
37. Jacques Lacan, *Ècrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966), 307; my translation.